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ABSTRACT

The degree of incivility varies, but there seems to be general agreement that it is on the rise on college campuses across the country. A number of key elements are involved in the communication aspects of civility: a lack of respect for another human being; name calling and dehumanization; disqualification from dialogue; threats and incitation; examples of incivility on television/radio; and politics. "Hate incidents" related to racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes are occurring with increasing frequency. Campus incivility also involves intolerant radical religious groups, as well as just plain bad manners. At Messiah College, a Christian college in Pennsylvania, where most students come from middle-class religiously conservative homes, the college president suggested that a weekly student newspaper invite public engagement on issues. Although editorial policies warned that civil and responsible use of words was expected, many letters contained all of the earlier listed types of incivilities. To address incivility in the classroom, communication faculty added wording to goals for the required general education communication courses (Introduction to Public Communication; Introduction to Relational Communication). Specific pedagogical strategies address epistemological humility: civil language, inclusive attitudes, and consideration for the feelings of others. Teaching the language of disagreement, which should be mostly the language of respectful listening; discussion of controversial subjects; and critiquing negative media models by role playing are methods of addressing the problem of thoughtlessness. Communication teachers must also teach and model respect and understanding. (Contains 52 references.) (CR)

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ED 404 701

ADDRESSING CAMPUS-WIDE COMMUNICATION INCIVILITY IN THE BASIC COURSE: A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The Prevalence of Incivility on College Campuses

For the last two years, since the inauguration of a new president at our college, a prevailing theme on campus has been "civility." Evidently, the new president, a Canadian Mennonite, found that quality wanting as he entered a new academic environment in central Pennsylvania. His first lecture on the subject was addressed to the faculty, who had just emerged from a bitter struggle involving the retiring president and a fired academic dean. Then last year, the president of the student association addressed the faculty, pleading for help in addressing the problem of student-to-student incivility and intolerance, much occurring in racial, religious, and political arenas.

What is happening at my college seems to be the rule rather than the exception for campuses across the country. The degree of incivility varies, but there seems to be general agreement that it is on the rise. According to Monaghan (1995), "bored" students simply get up in the middle of a lecture and leave; some simply read the paper. Monaghan also reports incidents of a student challenging a teacher to a fight over a grade, of a student calling her teacher "a bitch" in class, and of classes becoming so unruly, that teachers are simply forced to leave. Racial epithets still are heard at our nation's most exclusive schools, and at the same time, strong backlash anti-Politically-Correct and libertarian movements seem to be emerging (Shea; March 24, 1995; Sept. 15, 1995). Moreover, the courts have struck down efforts at a number of schools, including Stanford, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin, to eliminate a hostile communication environment through the establishment of speech codes (Shea, Nov. 17, 1995). Schools are also struggling with

religious groups, whose voices are becoming more strident, "demanding and pushing students to do things they don't want to do" (Gose, 1995).

When incivility reaches extremes it becomes crime, which is also on the increase on campuses across the country (Lederman, 1995). Furthermore, there appears "to be a greater inclination toward violence," and all this during a time when nationally most crime categories are on the decrease (Lederman, p. A42). A typical litany of student arrests in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (June 30, 1995, p. A6-7) included criminal trespass, aggravated harassment, and aggravated assault (shooting at three people in a lab).

Elements of Communication Incivility

This paper will not deal with the wider issue of crime on the college campus, but will instead focus in on communication aspects of the new incivility. There seem to be a number of key elements involved.

Lack of Respect. The most basic component of incivility is simply a lack of respect for another human being. This is the position of the ethical egoist who takes the "I-it" stance as opposed to the "I-thou" stance promoted by Buber (1937). It perhaps could be argued that an ethical egoist can still be civil as Ringer (1977) asserts, but treating others as a means to self-gratification and fulfillment invites trouble. Closely related to the lack of respect for our human brothers and sisters, is a general lack of respect for social groups of humans that constitute institutions. Wolfe (1989) suggests that the moral code of the market has replaced that of civil society resulting in pessimistic, self-serving, antisocial behavior. Schmookler (1993) makes much the same assessment; the sacred has disappeared, and nothing is of value

unless a price tag can be put on it. And so we put price tags on our fellow human beings, and those with the cheap tags get trashed.

Name-calling and Dehumanization. As the market dehumanizes us by giving us price tags, so we dehumanize each other with name tags. "Bitch," "nigger," "nerd," and "faggot" are still heard. One student, in the author's class last year got up and attempted to give a demonstration speech on how to dress like a "wigger" ("white nigger"). Political name-calling is even more rampant, especially during an election year. In the evangelical Christian subculture, labels that would normally be legitimate take on attributes of demonization. "Humanist," "feminist," "liberals," "new-agers," "abortionists," "homosexuals," and "post-modernists" become targets of "spiritual warfare," "a struggle for the soul of America" where an "anything goes when you're fighting for God" attitude seems to prevail.

Disqualification from Dialogue. Stopping the conversation because the other communication partner is considered unworthy the effort is a common form of disqualification. Such action not only denies the humanity of the partner but denies the humanity of the one stopping the conversation. Our ability to engage in dialogue is what makes us human; we become human through linguistic interaction, through the socialization process of mutual influence. Drawing on Brockriede's development of Plato's rhetorical lover, Johannesen (1983) delineates the attitudes that contribute to true dialogue: "equality, respect, willingness to risk self-change, openness to new ideas and arguments, and a genuine desire to promote free choice in the audience" (p. 60). Jaksa & Pritchard (1994) further emphasize that "tolerating differences of choice and refraining from automatically labeling opposite choices as immoral are essential" (p. 17).

Often not only are choices labelled "immoral" but conversational partners are labelled "immoral" as well. When this happens, the conversation usually stops. The closing down of communication can be either physical or psychological. When we close down psychologically, we move from dialogue to monologue. Sometimes we remove ourselves, sometimes we demand the removal of others ("We don't need to listen to this anymore. The meeting stands adjourned!").

Threats and Incitation. At this point, persuasion becomes coercion, argument may turn to violence. Manipulation is blatant. Constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech may no longer apply. Civil authorities, police agencies, the judiciary may have to become involved. Communication in the form of "harassment," "psychological abuse," or "inciting riot" is not just uncivil but constitutes a criminal act.

Social Sources of Communication Incivility

Television and Radio. We are constantly being bombarded with examples of incivility over the airwaves. Leo (1996) indicts television as a prime promoter of "coarse, confrontational...gutter talk," especially accusing ads and talk shows, including ads featuring themes of defecation, oral sex, and the F-gesture; perhaps most appalling was the New York talk show host who, on the occasion of Secretary Ron Brown's plane crash, said "that as 'a pessimist' he feared Brown might have survived" (p. 73). The worst offenders include sitcoms, talk and call-in shows, cartoons (with Beavis and Butthead winning the all-time incivility award), professional sports (especially professional wrestling), and TV preachers.

Charles Berger, ICA president, made a recent plea for sanity in regard to talk shows that foster profound distortion and may serve "subtly to re-calibrate and justify higher levels of verbal and nonverbal intensity among their viewers":

> A quick surf of so-called "talk shows" is like watching and listening to a badly polluted stream flow by. The seemingly unending flow of toxic waste made available to the public by the media within this and other genre is truly amazing. Outraged "victims" scream at each other, while "hosts" egg them on to ever more intense emotional frenzies. (Berger, 1996, p. 2)

Schultze (1986) specifically identifies sitcoms as modeling verbal "put-down" behavior. We laugh as we watch the screen, but then wonder why nobody is laughing when we try to use the same lines in real life. Sometimes we get laughs from third parties, but the victims of our put-down's are usually devastated, all the more so if there is a guffawing gallery.

Three television "phenomena" that go well beyond other programs in making incivility the tone of the times are Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh and MTV's Beavis and Butthead. Although oriented toward different ends of the socio-political spectrum, they all outrageously challenge established notions of civility: from Stern's "smart-ass bad manners" (LaFranco, 1994, p. 62) to Limbaugh' name-calling, blatant lying (Shenk; May, 1994; August, 1994) and demagoguery (Sifry, 1995) to Beavis and Butthead's representation of "everything that can possibly go wrong with an adolescent boy....telling very stupid jokes, behaving like idiots in the back of their high school classes and masturbating while they watch rock video on MTV" (Zagano, 1994). Of course all three programs have their defenders (McConnell [1994] refers to Beavis and Butthead as "art," and Gardner [1994] refers to the same show as a masterpiece in "ironic" humor); but when a "Miss Evangelical, goody-two-shoes, Jesus-

witnessing coed at conservative Christian college protests to her professor (the author) with the words "that sucks," it is time to take these pervasive models of gross incivility seriously. Likewise, an evangelical lay leader reflects on how Rush Limbaugh has influenced him:

> Why did I feel so in conflict with one of my own fellow ministers over something as temporal and idiotic...as politics, for heaven's sake?
>
> Listening to Rush put me in a combative frame of mind regarding anything having to do with the L-word.
>
> Limbaugh can make you so *mad* with his zany but pointed criticism of the "other side."
>
> And is it just me, or does anyone else notice the movement among dittoheads to "convert" friends and neighbors? I kid you not. (Kunkel, 1994, p. 12)

Referring to Limbaugh as the person "who made hate radio respectable for our era," The *National Catholic Reporter* warns:

> Society slips easily from dissatisfaction to rancor to belligerence. This is usually done by talk. It doesn't happen overnight but gradually. It grows like a cancer. A climate of anger and hate is cultivated. (Our words, 1995, p. 16)

Politics. Although many political messages are conveyed by television, this social source of incivility deserves special attention, especially during this election year. Even before the beginning of the Presidential primary campaigns, Faucheux (1994) observed, "There is a declining sense of civility in our politics, an abandonment of standards....It's an abscess that has oozed its toxin throughout the political system" (p. 7). The situation seems to have deteriorated to the point where even leaders are questioning the very democratic process; Hugh Price (1995), president of the National Urban League bemoans:

> Public discourse these days, as played out in political campaigns or over talk radio, is an utter disgrace. Worse still, it fans tensions which tear our society apart at its ethnic seams. The only consolation may lie in the fact that it has so debased democracy that people will soon tire of it and tune out. (p. 213)

"Civility, honesty and a focus on issues has given way to hostility, deception and focus on innuendo" according to Bobbie Lundgren (1995), wife of California Attorney General Dan Lundgren (p. 725).

As the 1996 Presidential campaign unfolded, the realization that "American has become a rude country" (Brookhiser, 1995, p.41) was driven to the forefront of almost everyone's awareness. With the Republican primaries opening as an all out slugfest, "the breakdown in civil debate and discourse" and "the ratcheted up ...violence of our words" reached a crescendo (Bowman, 1996, p. 16). Observing that "something has changed," one columnist referred to 1996 as "the year civility died," adding that campaign ads are going for the "opponent's jugular" (Edna, 1996, p. A18). Political philosopher, Elshtain (1995) has warned that "we are in danger of losing democratic civil society" (p. xiii).

The Leaching of Incivility onto the Campus

Television programs and politics are probably only reflections of what is occurring on all levels of society, from Yale Law School's promotion of "legal realism" based on considerations of power, to Madison Avenue's "assault ads" that attack competitors rather than positively promote a product. Greenfield (1995) in a recent *Newsweek* editorial declared, "The only thing I am sure of is that the whole fabric of civility and respect among ourselves has been ripped to tatters and that it's not just armed crazies or political screwballs who are responsible" (p. 78). According to a *U.S. News & World Report* poll done earlier this year, 89 per cent of Americans feel incivility is a serious problem and 78 per cent feel it is getting worse (Marks, 1996).

Having been in graduate school during the campus demonstrations and protests of the late 60s, the author, detects some differences in the new incivility as it affects colleges and universities. Most of the incivility of the 60s was directed at policies and institutions, rather than at individuals. When it was directed at individuals, they were usually significant figureheads, who officially represented policies or institutions. Furthermore, most of the protest in the 60s was organized and purposeful. Today, the incivility is completely individualized; it is initiated by bitter individuals and aimed at individual targets who simply hold different ideas or identities. The action is not taken to make a point but to vent or harm.

Sidel (1994) has done an excellent job chronicling "hate incidents"--"racist, sexist, and homophobic" that seem to be popping up on campuses across the country with increasing regularity during the 90s decade. Incidents range from a "racial brawl" involving approximately sixty students at small Olivet College in Michigan to anti-Semitic spray paintings at America University and California State University at Northridge to Gay Bashing T-shirts sold at Syracuse University that announced "Homophobic and Proud of It!" and "Club Faggots Not Seals" (pp. 79-100). Sexist harassment, abuse, and violence appears even more common, typically perpetuated in songs, parties, and contests by fraternities and athletic teams. Of course, some of these activities are "traditional," but there also seems to be an increase in both the number of incidents and the severity of incidents, some of which appear to be part of a PC backlash.

Another kind of incivility that is appearing on campus involves intolerant radical religious groups. Carl Rheins, Dean of Student Life at Adelphi University warns that these

extreme religious groups "oppose freedom of thought and discourse" and "can disrupt and often destroy lives" (Rudin, 1991, p. 1).

Finally, there is the common incivility, bad manners, that was discussed earlier in this paper; the kind of incivility that most commonly finds its way into the classroom. All of these incivilities, however, varying in degree of seriousness, need to be seriously confronted within the structure of higher education. What better place to deal with these problems than in the communication classroom, for all of these incivilities manifest themselves in communicative interaction, both verbal and nonverbal. The remainder of this paper will deal with a case study involving a series of communication incidents that occurred at the author's college, followed by a number of suggestions for classroom remediation.

TAKING SWINGS IN THE *SWINGING BRIDGE*

Background

Messiah College is a "Christian college of the liberal and applied arts and sciences...rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions of the Christian Church" (Report, 1995, p. 3). It is primarily a residential college comprised of 2400 students located just south of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; there is one branch campus in Philadelphia affiliated with Temple University. Most of the students at Messiah come from central Pennsylvania, though a good number come from various sections of the eastern United States. Most come from white, middle-class homes that are politically, socially, and religiously conservative. The college has traditionally recruited students from private Christian schools and evangelical churches. Upon entry, students are asked to submit a profession of faith and are asked to sign a "Community Covenant," which prohibits such things as tobacco, alcoholic beverages,

and gambling. It appears that some students were "sent" to Messiah by parents, and for others, Messiah was among a number of Christian schools for which parents were willing to pay.

The Swinging Bridge is the student newspaper that comes out once a week. Named after a popular campus landmark, its quality has varied significantly over the years. This last year, under the editorship of honor student, Joy Wang, it had attained a reputation of journalistic excellence, though not without controversy. In fact, the student newspaper at Messiah College had probably never been more controversial. The focus of the controversy was on the paper itself and (because it was supervised by an official faculty advisor) the College. The climax of the controversy was reached in the fall of 1995, when Public Safety was called in for a veiled threat to the paper and editor, and the Community of Educators (faculty, administrators, and co-curricular staff) issued a statement calling for tolerance and civility.

Climate

As the 1995-96 school year started, a number of fault lines were evident on campus. Rumors were still circulating of how the college had gotten rid of a number of "liberal" professors and a "liberal" academic dean. When the academic year ended the previous spring term, the campus had experienced a "revival," as had other evangelical campuses, and some student were committed to seeing it pick up where it had left off. Others who detected signs of "spiritual engineering," emotional excess, and divisiveness were not so keen to see this movement revitalized.

The religious conservative/liberal fault existed not only among the student population, but among the faculty as well. It had opened to gaping proportions two years earlier, but an incoming Mennonite President had succeeded quite well in closing this gap. Yet, the perceived ascendancy of pacifist anabaptists opened another fault, especially important in an upcoming election year, the conservative/liberal political fault. Another fault that had opened the previous semester was the diversity issue, especially as it dealt with roles of women. Issues such as homosexuality and abortion were generally considered too hot to handle. The faculty appeared to be split evenly on most issues, with a substantial number of moderates in the middle, hence the stage was set for reconciliation.

The situation among students, however, was quite different. Most students leaned to the extreme right of the religious, social and political spectrums (this was probably the result of recruiting from private Christian high schools and the home schooled). *The Swinging Bridge* staff, for the most part did not fit this pattern, especially the editor, who perhaps because of her ethnic identity was especially sensitive to social issues. So the "liberal intellectuals" in the student body seemed to have control of the paper.

Issues

As just indicated, the overarching issue at Messiah College seemed to be one of identity and affiliation: Who has the right to call him or herself Christian and be part of the Messiah College community? A second overarching question was related to the first: What ideas ought to be expressed in the pages of a Christian College student paper?

A number of sub-issues were also involved. The most important, in the context of Messiah College, were theological: What is the nature of the Christian God? How exclusive

is Christianity? What constitutes salvation? What is the nature of divine inspiration and authority? Social issues were usually viewed as related to theological issues: What is the biblical position on abortion, mercy killing, homosexuality, warfare, welfare, substance abuse, patriotism, gun control, etc. Political issues were commonly tied to social issues (the question of a candidate's religious identity was not important--after two born-again Baptist democratic presidents). The most important political issues were those related to laws and regulations governing abortion, gay rights, media content, family values, etc.

Incidents

A word of warning was sounded by the editor in the first edition of *The Swinging Bridge* for the new 1995-96 academic year:

> It has been reiterated time and time again that Messiah College lacks civility, and is incapable of respectful dialogue concerning differences. All this is true, and is in need of acknowledgment.
>
> ...we need to see the problems of this community not as "their fault" but as our own. Our backgrounds teach us to hold others accountable, and to encourage spiritual excellence among others. However, I would suggest that it is a religiously grounded scramble to "convert" one another that is actually the source of our hidden resentment toward one another. (Wang, 1995, September 15, p. 4)

The second issue of *The Swinging Bridge* ran a guest editorial written by College President Sawatsky, recognizing diversity in views and urging a greater public engagement on issues. Sawatsky suggested that the newspaper could serve as a forum for airing such opinions on issues. At the same time, Sawatsky issued a warning concerning the civil and responsible use of words. As if to take advantage of the President's urging, the paper ran two highly controversial editorials on the same page with Sawatsky's comments. The first, from the political right, was a lengthy diatribe against the UN, linking it to pornography, infanticide, and pantheism. The second, from the theological left, was a monist probe

suggesting that "God must possess Evil within Himself to be able to love those who are evil" ending with a universalist barb, "that infinite Love, born of God's capability for infinite Evil, is why, if you ever journey to the gates of Hell, you will not find a soul" (Loomis, 1995, p. 5). This editorial was ably answered in a very logical way in the next issue of the paper.

Meanwhile, a chapel speaker, Harry Dent, associated with Billy Graham Crusades, gave a rousing patriotic "God and America" sermon in which he portrayed Christian Americans as the moral saviors of the world. Most of the students at Messiah thought this was one of the all-time best chapels; anabaptist faculty thought it one of the worst. Editor Wang echoed the sentiment of many faculty:

> It is my opinion that Harry Dent portrayed the sort of simpleminded evangelicalism that promotes ethnocentrism, intolerance, and basic ignorance. I fear for the damage that this type of thinking may engender at a typically evangelical community like Messiah College, and I was disturbed by the receptiveness of the crowd toward his unabashed fanaticism.
>
> I do not believe that it is our duty as Christians to aggressively enlighten the world around us. Our ministry should be one of service, understanding, and compassion. If we are to seriously share the gifts of Christian faith with those around us, we must develop greater openness to the possibility that (shocking as it may seem) God is not a white european [sic] protestant who has selectively chosen the United States for world supremacy. The God that I believe in is broader than differences in race, religions, and political agendas. (Wang, 1995, September 29, p. 6)

Up until this point, most of the communication would probably be considered civil, but in the next issue of the paper were some indications that all was not well. There were many letters to the editor, some supporting the editor's position on Dent, some denouncing it; all that were printed maintained a civil tone. However, there was a special note from the editor addressed to the "Messiah College Community" stating that she had concern for some students who seemed unable to handle the controversy that appeared in *The Swinging Bridge*. Evidently, much uncivil talk regarding the paper could be heard around campus, and some

students felt that the college was so apostate that they would have to leave. Also in this issue, the "monist/universalist" responded to the response, but also revealed that he had received a death threat, though he said that he took it as a joke.

In the next issue of *The Swinging Bridge*, all hell broke loose. The previous edition had included a new editorial policy which stated, "All letters will be printed as submitted, with the exception of improper language or excessive length" (Editorial policy, 1995, p. 8). However, in this edition, an exception was made. The editor, after conferring with the newspaper faculty advisor and the President, decided to print a disturbing letter that the paper had received. The letter was introduced by the editor with the following message:

> Although our policy is to ignore anonymous editorials, I have made an exception in this case. This letter has been printed in order to expose our struggles with civility and dialogue on this campus. In the future, all unsigned and inappropriate letters to the editor will be *immediately discarded* without consideration. I encourage readers to respond to this letter.
>
> (Since this letter-to-the-editor, I have been advised by Public Safety to take precautions to guard my personal well-being.) (Editor's note, 1995, October 20, p. 6)

The letter that followed the note contained all of the elements previously discussed as indicative of communication incivility: lack of respect, name-calling and dehumanization, disqualification from dialogue, and threats. The writer referred to the editor indirectly as "feminist, neo-nazi, new-age pinko." The editorials themselves were referred to as "anti-Christian garbage," "satanic propaganda," "poisoned stories straight from the pits of Hell," and "written...under the influence of the Devil himself" (Mad Quaker, 1995, p. 6).

The most disturbing parts of the letter were attempts to silence the editor or shut down the paper by threat of force. The writer of the letter used such phrases as "I will not

stand by idly...," "I will not allow...," and "I will not accept [this] literature...to be distributed on this Campus." Then the letter ended with the following ominous words:

> If these Editor/Anti-Christs refuse to stop their damning articles then I will be forced to take further action. If it is not enough to make you listen by writing to you, I am afraid I will have to get your attention another way. You must stop the printing of these heretical writings, or I will. This is not a threat, it is just the truth. I implore you, do not lead God's people astray any longer.
>
> Love-In-Christ
> The Mad Quaker (Mad Quaker, 1995, p. 6)

After the letter was printed, the Mad Quaker did not come forward to reveal his identity, but rather was hunted down by Public Safety over a period of time and was turned over to the Dean of Students and the Messiah College Student Association (MCSA) Judiciary Council. He assured the Council that the letter was all talk and that he meant no real harm, and so he was sentenced to "community service."

In the meantime, the Community of Educators and MCSA had met and issued statements, which were printed in the next issue of *The Swinging Bridge*. The faculty/staff statement condemned "a lack of tolerance for differing viewpoints and the persons who hold them," condemned as a "perversion" of Christianity the attitude that faith calls people to "threaten the safety or free speech of another," affirmed the institutional "commitment to the free exchange of ideas and dialogue," and called for the "community to model civility" (Bailey, et al., 1995, p. 5). The MCSA declaration was similar, specifically condemning "the attitudes presented in last week's letter-to-the-editor from the 'Mad Quaker.'" It continued, "This letter is unacceptable according to our understanding of Christian principles, based on its violence-directed threats and its unwillingness to truly witness 'love-in-Christ'" (Ross, et al. (1995, p. 5).

Interestingly enough, however, there appeared in the same issue of *The Swinging Bridge* two more letters to the editor which attempted to further shut down communication. The first, bordering on incivility, attacked "Marxist" professors and "an anachronistic" President Sawatsky, who "have become a regiment in America's war against conservatives" (Hollenbaugh, 1995, p. 7). The second letter came from the Assistant Chair of the Alumni Council of Messiah College and suggested that ideas "contrary to clear scriptural definitions" not be allowed in the paper. Also, "assuming that the campus newspaper represents the college" the same individual challenged the inclusion in the paper of R and NC-17 movie listings (Wingert, 1995, p. 7).

This "disqualification from dialogue" theme continued, even after threats and some of the name-calling had dissipated. Referring to the monist/universalist article and its rebuttal, a writer to the editor said, "when Ron Loomis stepped outside the absolutes I no longer considered anything he had to say as relevant." This writer continued, implying that Loomis' view "comes from Satan," and calling on the leadership of the college to "help us to uncover Satan's deceptive ways, especially whey [sic] they come from inside our community" (Wagner, 1995, p. 6).

Unfortunately this kind of literal demonization and disqualification from dialogue continues to haunt Messiah College and other evangelical Christian communities. During all this controversy a number of faculty, including three English professors, two theology professors, and a communication professor (the author of this paper) individually responded. Their views are best summarized by an English professor who urged the community to keep the conversation going, for "it takes <u>all voices</u> thinking together, perhaps <u>especially</u> the

extreme ones, to lead us toward emerging truth" (Walker, 1995, p. 6). But, perhaps even more needs to be said by professors, not only in extracurricular dialogue with students, but also more formally in the classroom.

ADDRESSING CAMPUS INCIVILITY IN THE COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

During the previous spring, the communication faculty at Messiah College, responding to a perceived incivility crisis, added wording to the goals for the required general education communication courses (Introduction to Public Communication and Introduction to Relational Communication) to insure that all students would be exposed to the ethical concept of civil dialogue:

> To examine with students our ethical responsibilities in the contexts of public free speech and private oral discourse, including the need to disagree and dialogue in a manner that communicates God's love. (LLC Dept. memo to Gen. Ed. Committee, 1995)

In order to accomplish the above goal, four specific pedagogic strategies have been developed. They address issues of epistemological humility, civil language, inclusive attitudes, and consideration for the feelings of others.

Teaching Epistemological Humility

Epistemology is a particularly troublesome area in dealing with religious fundamentalists who claim to absolutely know the TRUTH because of divine inspiration. For people who make such claims, it is very difficult to approach true dialogue in areas where there is disagreement involving God-revealed truth. There is no real reason to listen to another except to politely "play along," for social harmony or for strategic rhetorical insight. The ethical imperative that we open ourselves to the risk of influence to the extent that we expect

others to open themselves to our influence is completely lost. For through the miracle of revelation, epistemological absolutists often claim certain knowledge of truth and untruth.

The term "epistemological absolutism," however, is ambiguous. Is the content of the knowledge absolute, or is realization of the knowledge absolute? Or put another way, even if God (or "Science" or "Pure Reason") is able to reveal truth to us, might we not be uncertain just when this occurs and when it does not. Still another way to deal with this problem is to separate absolutist ontology from absolutist epistemology: we "believe," "have faith in," an absolute God and God's ways, though we could be deluded or mistaken; but faithful living is what is expected, and that simply requires a praxis of belief. This is what I attempt to teach my students at Messiah College. I do this by presenting logical arguments drawn from Biblical and theological sources that my students accept as authoritative. What follows constitutes the substance of my argument.

Luckily, within most evangelical theology, even fundamentalist theology, there are safeguards against people assuming the function of autonomous communication conduits of God. These safeguards lie in the doctrines of sin, sanctification, revelation, illumination, and the church. (I deal with Christian protestant fundamentalism because it is most relevant to my particular audience. Other fundamentalisms, religious or secular, could no doubt be dealt with in similar ways).

Original sin. For Christian fundamentalists, sin is pervasive and cannot be avoided; all humans are "born into" sin. It is viewed as a state, and "committing sins" or sinful behavior is the consequence of the state. Furthermore sin affects knowledge and beliefs, "we

deceive ourselves," "we are lost." But perhaps the effects of sin only impact the knowledge and beliefs of sinners and not "the saved." Not so.

Sanctification. This term generally refers to "cleansing from sin." It is something God does to us rather than something we accomplish ourselves. Among protestant fundamentalists, there are two major branches, Calvinists and Arminians. Calvinists tend to be theistic determinists; Arminians tend to be volitionists. Calvinists tend to believe in "eternal security," "once saved, always saved"; Arminians believe it is possible to lose salvation. Calvinists believe in gradual sanctification, emphasizing God's grace; Arminians believe in sanctification as a "distinct work of grace," an identifiable event like the salvation event. For Calvinist fundamentalists, there is no question that Christians are still entangled in sin in this life, though Christ's righteousness will cancel it out at the time of judgment. Thus human knowledge is also still clouded by sin; thus epistemological absolutism, in the sense of "the certainty of ideas in our heads" is impossible. For Arminians, especially those designated "holiness," the situation is more complicated. These protestant fundamentalists may believe in "Christian perfection." Once believers experience sanctification, "the second work of grace" (the first work being salvation), they cease to sin. However, they still do "make mistakes," and commonly these "mistakes" involve knowledge and ideas. So while, Arminians might not be sinning, they still are in no better position to claim epistemological certainty than Calvinists. Furthermore, Arminians can fall from states of both sanctification and grace at any time through their own volition, and may deceive themselves into thinking that they are still sanctified or saved, when in fact they are not. So in some ways epistemological certainty is even more problematic for Arminians than for Calvinists.

Revelation and Illumination. Starting with the assumption that words don't have meaning but people make meaning, the question shifts from "What is revelation?" to "How does God self-reveal to us?" The protestant fundamentalist will answer such a question in two ways, "through Jesus Christ" and "through scripture." A charismatic may add a third way, "directly to the individual through the Holy Spirit."

In dealing with the revelation of Christ, it might be asked whether what Christ did and taught was interpreted in different ways by the people around him? Also, do not Christians still interpret Christ differently? The same can be asked about the Bible. How do we know what the right interpretation is?

Shifting our line of inquiry, it seems obvious that when we speak, our words can have more than one meaning. In fact, we often purposely design messages to be ambiguous. Might not Christ have been doing just this when he taught in parables? Once students admit to multiple meaning and interpretation, the claim to epistemological absolutism begins to weaken. Furthermore, for those who believe in inspiration, it is emphasized that it is not the words or book that is inspired but the writers who wrote the words that were inspired. Also, it would do no good for the sender of a message to make meaning, only to have the receiver fail to make meaning. Therefore, for divine revelation to take place, two miracles are required, the writer must be inspired and the reader must be illuminated.

This kind of reasoning resonates with charismatics, who emphasize the illumination end of the equation. However, many charismatics rightly grasp that if God can help the reader or worshiper make meaning, the question of the writer's inspiration becomes academic. Hence, many charismatics claim immediate, individual, extrabiblical revelation

through "gifts" of "tongues" or prophesy. This presents one of the strongest arguments for epistemological absolutism and certainty. If Christians "know" that their ideas come immediately and directly from God, how can they engage in true dialogue? They cannot. But by the same line of thinking, they need not. If God wants to talk to the other person, he can do so directly, without the risk of misinterpretation. So why try to communicate at all?

From a Pauline Christian perspective, we communicate because God has chosen to use what is weak, incomplete, and distorted--human communication--to do divine work. God has created us as communicators, so that we have to depend on each other, fallible as we are, to come to truth. Furthermore, we do and must form interpretative communities--often called churches--to make sense of each other, the world, and "God."

The Church. The church is "the bride of Christ" and "the body of Christ." Just as the body has different physical functions, so the members of the church have different social functions, of which most important are interpretative functions. When we view a scene, we all see something different, when we hear a story we all hear something different; this is what brings us together, this is why we so desperately need each other. This is why we are commanded to love each other as we love God.

Which brings us back to our starting point, faith. None of us knows for sure, but that is the way it has to be. We have to make sense of our lives by trusting and loving others. That is just what Christ did that resulted in crucifixion. But therein lies our redemption if we have the courage to take up our own dialogic crosses. Christ loved us while we were yet sinners. And so we must risk ourselves, indeed our spiritual selves, when we communicate--especially when we listen--to others. It is impossible to communicate the Gospel without

risking our own spiritual well-being. When Christ uttered the following words, he was not just talking about physical life, he was talking about spiritual life: "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (Luke 9:24 KJV).

We cannot secure or maintain our own salvation. Salvation is a gift of God that we receive when we finally give up our attempts to guarantee our own spiritual well-being. It happens miraculously as we risk everything in entering into true dialogue with others--listening and risking change. As we let God speak to us through others, especially those most despised others, we begin a conversation with God that is eternally significant.

I have been presenting this line of argument for a dozen years, and it appears to be quite effective, though I am not sure all are able to follow it, and some appear initially confused. Because of this, I encourage questions at any time, and try to interact as much as possible. I also openly admit when I am unable to answer a question or when I simply do not know (though I have graduate theological training, I do not consider myself a competent theologian). Modeling epistemological humility often is more important than explicitly teaching principles anyway.

Teaching the Language of Disagreement

The language of disagreement should be to a large extent the language of respectful listening. It, of course, varies as the partners and setting of dialogue vary. The style of courtroom is not the style of the company committee, and the style of the company committee is not the style of the intimate relationship. Unfortunately, most communication texts do not deal with the specifics of respectful, civil language; and if society rarely provides good

models for such discourse, is it any wonder that the language habits of our students are found wanting?

Dealing with the issue of name-calling is more complex than it might initially appear. There would seem to be a fine line between unethical "name-calling" and legitimate "naming." There is great power in the ability to name or label, but simply because a communication partner does not accept a name does not mean it is uncivil. Just what constitutes incivility? Part of the answer has to do with the emotional content of the words and the degree that the words are directed *ad hominem*, against the personality or ego.

One exercise that works quite well to illustrate shades of incivility, as naming deteriorates to name-calling, is to decline adjectives or descriptive nouns according to the persons "I," "you," and "they." For example: "I am studious, you are a bookworm, they are nerds"; or "I am cautious, you are scared, they are yellow, lily-livered chickens." Having students write out such list teaches them a sense of perspective and impresses on them the idea that vocabulary is a matter of conscious choice.

Students need to be taught to avoid threatening language; this is not easy in a society that condones and even glorifies violence. Sometimes threats may be legitimate, if ground rules have been established; for example, in the contexts of labor negotiations or school discipline. In such cases, though threats might not be the best way to solve problems, they would not be considered uncivil unless the ground rules were violated.

Threats often constitute an attack on the physical well-being of the person; accusatory, judgmental language constitutes an attack on the psyche. Students can be taught to use "I" pronouns to *describe* feelings rather than "you" pronouns to *project* feelings. They can also

be taught to use "we" pronouns to emphasize common reference points, needs, and goals. Hocker and Wilmot (1995) provide a good summary of "the language of common interests" and "the language of collaboration" (pp. 206, 209). Also Gibb's (1961) classic work with supportive versus defensive climates can be helpful.

Addressing the "Us Versus Them" Concept of Community

There are basically two different concepts of community. The first is that commonality is created by selection and deletion. Here the emphasis is on commonness of ideas, beliefs, values, lifestyles, etc. Only certain people are let into these communities, and if they should change their ideas, beliefs, values, or lifestyles, they are expelled. Palmer (1977) refers to this kind of community as "false community." According to Palmer, true community attains its commonality through its spiritual commitment to each other as expressed in its interaction, and interaction "always means the collision of egos" (p. 19). Moreover, community is not achieved "by an extension and expansion of our own egos, a confirmation of our own partial view of reality," but will be characterized by differences:

> In a true community we will not choose our companions, for our choices are so often limited by self-serving motives. Instead, our companions will be given to us by grace. Often they will be persons who will upset our settled view of self and world. In fact, we might define true community as that place where the person you least want to live with always lives! (p. 20)

This is a difficult concept to convey in a school that so carefully chooses its teachers and students, and dismisses the former for reasons of ideological "defection" (a favorite term of a former academic dean). Ideas need to be dealt with for what they are. If they are "dangerous," they must have power, and that power usually comes from elements of truth that they contain. Patently false ideas are never dangerous; their falseness is quickly demonstrated,

and they are dropped. Dangerous ideas are the very ideas that need to be explored, especially in the setting of higher education. Through such exploration, true community comes into being, it is not torn apart; the conversation continues with a new intensity, it does not stop.

In my classes, therefore, I purposely bring up controversial subjects. When I enter into an argument, it is usually to give additional support to a faltering side; in fact, I am almost constantly switching sides. I do not allow my students to give persuasive speeches that simply reinforce existing beliefs or inspire; the assignment always requires that they attempt to *change* their audience in some way, be it beliefs, values, attitudes, opinions, or behavior.

Addressing the Problem of Thoughtlessness

Much incivility of communication is simply the result of not considering the feelings of the other person. We "say things without thinking." Where do these hurtful "things" come from? One source, as previously noted, is the media. As communication teachers, we need to critique these negative social models in the classroom. Video clips of sitcoms and soaps work very well into units on relational communication, usually as models of what not to do.

Another technique that can be combined with critiquing negative media models is role play. When students actually feel what it is like to be the victim of uncivil language, they remember it and think twice before repeating such behavior. It is especially effective to have students feel the sting of their own words. Without revealing the exercise, students can be asked to make a list of abusive words or phrases, including names, put-downs, jokes, and

threats that they have used in the last month. They can then be paired with a partner, exchange lists, and allow the other to verbally abuse them with their own words. Sometimes we cannot (do not) remember when we have been so thoughtless until specific common examples such as "that sucks," "shut up," or "you're out of your mind" are provided. The feelings should be discussed as a group after the work with dyads is complete.

CONCLUSION: TAKING THE HELM TO WORK THE WIND

Running

Because the wind of incivility is so strong, the easy way out is just to ignore it and let the boat run. Although we might not use uncivil language ourselves, we nevertheless reinforce it when we tolerate it by our silent consent. During the protest era of the late 1960s, uncivil language was in academic vogue at many large universities; in fact, it was almost a requirement for TAs in the classroom. But we were also teargassing and shooting students, and assaulting egos in T-groups. Hopefully, as social policy becomes more mean and lean, we will not return to those days.

Trimming

As communication teachers, we need to both teach and model respect and understanding. The key to developing these attitudes is empathic listening. We need to genuinely listen to our students, not just feign polite attention while our minds are caught up with a million other concerns. I have noticed that on my campus, faculty simply will not give others the time of day; they walk away, turn away, and interrupt in the middle of a conversation. These communication behaviors might well be considered nonverbal incivility. In an increasingly hurried and depersonalized culture, we have to make time and create psychic

space for each other. College students are just like pre-schoolers, in fact we all are; if we can't gain attention positively, we will gain it negatively. We refuse to be ignored or treated as numbers, as well we should.

Tacking

We need to question and critique communication practices, both in the larger cultural sphere and on our campuses. We need to involve ourselves in campus controversy and debate. When necessary, we need to address metacommunication issues, both inside and outside the classroom. Sometimes this may involve sailing into the wind of popular student slang or into the wind of administrative unresponsiveness.

Hauling

It is good to alternate sides whenever possible, especially in the classroom. Both students and faculty are often confused on "where I am coming from." Of course, I am coming from the metaworld of communication. Approaching my discipline from a post-modern perspective, this is very easy for me. I construct and deconstruct according to the practical exigencies of pedagogy, relationships, and community.

Docking

Our pedagogical ship is docked when learning is tied down experientially. This is why role-playing is so helpful. Another method to tie down learning is to require students to keep daily journals where they note and reflect upon incidents of incivility, whether perpetrated by self or others. Whenever we attempt to teach behavior that runs counter to cultural norms, we face difficulties. This is precisely because what is taught in the classroom is negated by everyday experience. Trying to dock a boat with the sails up in a heavy wind is

just about impossible. Yet by vigorously critiquing communication incivility and offering constructive alternatives, we can perhaps bring the sails at least part way down or at least release the boom to make them a little less susceptible to that savage wind.

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